

LEARNING IN ACTION

RESOURCE TOOLKIT

Resources to Use for Planning and Conducting High-Quality Site Visits

A Companion Guide to Learning in Action



June 2010



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Great Schools Partnership



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Contents

Introduction	1
Section 1: Building Knowledge Base of SLC Strategies	2
1 On Course for Success: A Close Look at Selected High School Courses that Prepare All Students for College and Work	3
2 A Call to Action: Transforming High Schools for all Youth	4
3 The Power to Change: High Schools that Help All Students Achieve	5
4 Gaining Traction, Gaining Ground: How Some High Schools Accelerate Learning for Struggling Students	6
5 Recommendation #8: Help Get Low-Performing Students Back on Track by Designing Literacy and Math Recovery Programs	7
6 Using Small Learning Communities with Extra Time and Extra Help in Core Subjects to Meet the Needs of all Students Without Tracking	8
7 Small Learning Communities and Tracking: Evidence from Five High Schools Divided into Schools-within-Schools	9
8 Making the Move: How Freshman Academies and Thematic Small Learning Communities Can Support Successful Transitions to and through High School	10
9 Freshmen Transition Strategies, Structures, and Comprehensive Planning Guide	11
10 Ensuring Successful Student Transitions from the Middle Grades to High School	12
11 Changing Systems to Personalize Learning: The Power of Advisories	13
Section 2: Preparing for the Site Visit: Engaging in Group Planning and Goal-Setting Meetings	14
12 Goal Setting Protocol	15
13 Data Driven Dialogue	16
14 College Readiness for All Toolbox	17
15 Promoting College Access and Success: A Review of Credit-Based Transition Programs	18

16	Opening Classroom Doors: Strategies for Expanding Access to AP	19
17	Critical Friend's Groups: Frequently Asked Questions	20
Section 3: Reviewing and Assessing Implementation Strategies: Resources to Use during the Site Visit		21
18	High School Reform Strategy Toolkit	22
19	A Call to Action Indicators Protocol: Site Visit and Discussion Guide	23
20	Interdisciplinary Team Meeting Agenda	24
21	Ghost Visit	25
22	Senior Culminating Project Handbook	26
23	SLC Team-Led Inquiry into Program and Practice	27
24	Parent Survey—General	28
25	Student Survey—Impact of Implementation	29
26	Gap Analysis: Developing and Redefining Your Goals and Objectives, Learn about SLCP Grantee Practice, Tools for Continuous Improvement	30
27	Writing Goals and Objectives: A Guide for Grantees of the Smaller Learning Communities Program	31
28	SLC Goals and Objectives Tutorial	32
29	Learn About SLCP Grantee Practice: Strategy Analysis Tool	33
30	Tuning Protocol	34
31	Consultancy Protocol	35
Appendix: Additional Tools, Resources, and Websites		36

Introduction

This collection of resources was selected to support the learning, planning, and teamwork required to conduct high-quality school-based site visits. The Resource Toolkit is organized to support the process outlined in its companion piece, *Learning in Action: How to Conduct and Learn from High-Quality Site Visits*, and is aligned with the priorities of the Smaller Learning Communities Program (SLCP). Together, the guide and resource toolkit will help school teams have a more robust professional development experience when visiting a school. While the Resource Toolkit was specifically developed for site-visit teams, additional users have been identified for each resource.

This toolkit consists of more than thirty descriptions of resources, including helpful tips and advice on when and how to use the resources. Although the resources are ordered within each section according to how they would most likely be used in the site-visit process, they can be used wherever it makes the most sense to the site-visit team. The toolkit resources are also reference by number throughout in the *Learning in Action* guide.

- Resources are listed under following categories (although some are listed under multiple categories):
- Section 1 provides background materials that will be useful for increasing knowledge of high school improvement, smaller learning community (SLC) strategies, and best-practice research. These resources are helpful for reviewing the overall landscape of transforming high schools to better engage all students and prepare them for postsecondary opportunities.
- Section 2 includes tools for fostering dialogue and building a shared vision and goals as part of the site-visit team's planning process.
- Section 3 includes tools and protocols to be used during the site visit. These resources should be reviewed before the visit so that they may be quickly accessed during the busy visit schedule.

The appendix lists several websites where educators can find additional useful resources.

The Resource Toolkit does not provide a particular process, but rather resources to assist any educator involved in school-improvement efforts. Hopefully, these materials and tools will support and inspire school leaders, planning teams, students, families, and community members engaged in the vital, challenging, and rewarding work of preparing all students for success in high school, postsecondary education, and beyond.

Section 1

Building a Knowledge Base of SLC Strategies



On Course for Success: A Close Look at Selected High School Courses that Prepare All Students for College and Work.

ACT and the Education Trust (2005).

act.org/research/policymakers/pdf/success_report.pdf

Target Users: site-visit teams, SLCP directors, leadership teams, teachers, central office staff, and parents

When to Use This Resource

- As background reading for stakeholders concerned with improving student learning and ensuring that each student graduates ready for postsecondary success.
- To help schools consider what programs are no longer useful or affordable, given their SLCP goals.
- To understand an instruction-centered approach for moving beyond the vision of the comprehensive high school as a model of excellence.

Focus of This Resource

From the report:

ACT, Inc., and the Education Trust, the co-authors of this report, are devoted to the educational success of all students, especially the minority and low-income students who will increasingly contribute to the U.S. economy. In particular, ACT and the Education Trust are working to ensure that all students arrive at the doors of colleges and universities ready for college-level study without the need for remediation. That means finding out what essential qualities of high school courses foster successful transition to college.

The results of this study are clear: In high schools with significant minority and low-income student populations, students can be prepared to succeed in credit-bearing first-year college courses. And we know that the skills expected for college are also the skills needed to enter today's workforce. So whether students plan further education or work after high school graduation, they need to graduate college-ready.

Tips for Using This Resource

Site-visit teams should inquire about (1) what the host school eliminated from its course of studies as a result of the SLCP program and (2) what courses or programs were added. Are “lower level” programs or courses still in place? Which students are enrolled?

2

A Call to Action: Transforming High Schools for all Youth.

National High School Alliance (2005).

hsalliance.org/calltoaction.asp

Target Users: site-visit teams, SLCP directors, school leaders, and teachers

When to Use This Resource

- To foster a rich dialogue among teams of stakeholders on the key practices needed to radically change the traditional factory-model high school.
- As a good starting point for educating the school community and, when coupled with student data, making a compelling case for change.

Focus of This Resource

From the National High School Alliance website:

A Call to Action: Transforming High School for All Youth is a framework of six core principles and recommended strategies for preparing all of our nation's youth for college, careers, and active civic participation. A Call to Action provides leaders at the national, state, district, school, and community levels with a common framework for building public will, developing supportive policies, and actually implementing the practices needed to radically change the traditional, factory-model high school that tracks and sorts students.

Tips for Using This Resource

School leadership teams may use the Indicators Protocol to gain information about the current status of their school in relation to the National High School Alliance's six core principles. Site-visit teams may find the current-status data helpful as they observe the implementation of an indicator in another school and see what the different phases of implementation look like "on the ground." Teams may also use the indicators to assess the effectiveness of their action plan and progress toward goals, and schools can select the indicators that are most aligned with their redesign work.

3

*The Power to Change:
High Schools that Help All Students Achieve.*
The Education Trust (2005).
[edtrust.org/dc/publication/the-power-to-change-high-schools-
that-help-all-students-achieve](http://edtrust.org/dc/publication/the-power-to-change-high-schools-that-help-all-students-achieve)

Target Users: site-visit teams, school leaders, teachers, and other practitioners

When to Use This Resource

- When preparing for a school site visit to help teams think about how other schools have overcome the challenges of school redesign under difficult demographic circumstances.
- To persuade those who are reluctant to change or who are struggling to shift their focus to student needs rather than on what teachers think students can or cannot do. The stories could be helpful in cultivating a “can-do” attitude within a group.

Focus of This Resource

From the report:

It is generally acknowledged that American high schools are not nearly as good as they need to be. Large numbers of students—30 percent or more—do not even make it to graduation. And even among those who do, far too few are prepared for post-secondary education or work.

In this report, we examine three schools that serve mostly low-income or minority students. Two of the three schools are performing in the top tiers of their respective states; the other is one of the fastest improving high schools in its state. What makes these schools special is that they are succeeding with students who usually are on the wrong end of the achievement gap—poor students and students of color. Such schools are not common, but they do exist. Their very existence stands as proof that high schools can do more than we have ever expected.

Tips for Using This Resource

The report may be used to help groups prioritize conversations about roadblocks to student achievement and help them focus on the possibilities, not the problems. The report emphasizes the power of teachers who set high expectations for all students and who believe that each student can, with support, achieve those expectations.

This resource is best used during text-based discussions within a team or an entire faculty during the goal-setting phase of a site visit or action plan. The goal of preparing all students for higher education can seem daunting, so it is easy to fall into the trap of citing all the reasons why “we could never do that here.” Such thinking is often with a response to the difficulties teachers face when trying to manage or engage certain students, rather than on the many proven, research-based practices and attitudes can make a real difference in student outcomes. This report affirms that students under the most challenging personal circumstances can achieve at a high level with excellent teaching and support. Used before a site visit, the report helps establish the positive stance that team members and the entire school must take regarding their challenging but rewarding role in the school-change process.

4

*Gaining Traction, Gaining Ground:
How Some High Schools Accelerate Learning for Struggling Students.*
The Education Trust (2005).
edtrust.org/dc/publication/gaining-traction-gaining-ground-how-some-high-schools-accelerate-learning-for-struggl

Target Users: site-visit teams, leadership teams, and teachers exploring strategies to assist students who enter high school underprepared

When to Use This Resource

- To help make the case that all students can achieve at a much higher level in an environment of high expectations.
- To learn about specific strategies for catching up and keeping up.
- To guide a text-based discussion focusing on high expectations and what the school can do differently, while avoiding the tendency to perceive students as “the problem.”
- As a good “pre-read” when convening a team for a site visit, and to help the group develop essential questions, such as “What can our school do to ensure that all students graduate ready to succeed in college?”

Focus of This Resource

From the report:

This study is meant not to answer all possible questions, but to help answer one of the most frequent questions we get from high school staffs: What do we know about the characteristics and practices of schools that are especially effective at improving the academic performance of previously low-performing students?

This study examined seven public high schools. Four were “high-impact”—that is, they produced unusually large growth among students who entered significantly behind. We compared these high-impact schools with three average-impact schools with similar demographics. By looking at both sets of schools, we hoped to find out what the high-impact schools do differently than the average-impact schools.

Tips for Using This Resource

Set a tone that focuses on what the schools can do differently to meet SLCP priorities. Use a text-based-discussion protocol (see Toolkit resource #31 or the National School Reform Faculty website, www.nsrffharmony.org, for additional protocols) for reviewing the report. Rather than focus on what teachers are not doing or may need to change, ask teachers what they think they believe needs to happen to achieve comparable gains for their students. During a site visit, the visiting team may pose a similar question to teachers during the presentation on changes in practice at the host school.

5

Recommendation #8: Help Get Low-Performing Students Back on Track by Designing Literacy and Math Recovery Programs.
Excerpted from *Getting It Done*, National Governors Association (2005).
nga.org/files/pdf/05warnerguid08.pdf

Target Users: site-visit teams, leadership teams, teachers, and central office staff

When to Use This Resource

- As background reading during SLC planning sessions or before a site visit, especially in discussions of ways to address the needs of underprepared students.
- To help teams sort out the difference between remediation and acceleration. Site-visit teams may observe some of both at host school, and it is important to understand the distinct outcomes and expectations of these programs.

Focus of This Resource

From the guide:

Students who enter ninth grade with below-grade-level reading and math skills are less likely to graduate high school, and those who do graduate are generally unprepared for further education or the workforce. Accelerated literacy and math recovery programs help provide ninth-grade students with the skills they need to be successful in high school and the confidence and support they need to persist to graduation. These programs often provide additional instruction to accelerate students' skills and enable them to take a college preparatory curriculum beginning in 10th grade. States can help ensure that more students have the skills they need to succeed in high school and take courses that will prepare them for college by implementation in high schools statewide.

Tips for Using This Resource

This document suggests strategies for combating student under-preparation on two fronts: acceleration of skill development and building the personal confidence needed to succeed. Site-visit teams are encouraged to look for these two elements working in concert when observing academic support systems at host schools. Use this resource to develop probing questions about the academic and personal development of students.

6

Using Small Learning Communities with Extra Time and Extra Help in Core Subjects to Meet the Needs of all Students Without Tracking.

U.S. Department of Education (2006).

slcp.ed.gov

Target Users: site-visit teams and all key stakeholders, particularly teachers and parents

When to Use This Resource

- To focus on the issue of detracking. The implementation of heterogeneous groups as part of SLC work can be a hot-button issue. This SLCP issue paper should be required reading for all stakeholders because it explains why heterogeneous grouping practices are essential if schools are committed to graduating all students ready for college without remediation.
- To help a site-visit team observe heterogeneous grouping practices in action and formulate thoughtful questions.

Focus of This Resource

This SLCP issue paper offers research on both the positive and negative aspects of grouping practices. As public policy on the local, state, and national level is firmly moving away from separate content for certain students and toward rigorous, common learning standards for all students, educators need to increase their understanding of the impact of tracking or other ability-grouping practices. The paper offers strategies for minimizing the impact of tracking and approaches to scheduling and staffing that allow schools to move away from tracking.

Tips for Using This Resource

Conversations about tracking can quickly spiral downward, becoming emotionally charged and laden with inaccurate information about teaching and learning. It is critical for educators to be schooled in the research and able to present a strong, data-driven rationale for making changes in a school's grouping practices. Involving parents in site visits to schools that have achieved a successful heterogeneous model is one effective strategy for moving the detracking agenda forward. It is important for parents to understand that a rigorous core-curriculum model is essential for students to be both college- and career-ready.

Educators must be prepared to address the common misperception that “not all students are college material.” Some students may indeed choose not to attend college after high school, but schools need to provide all students with the high-quality preparation required to make collegiate learning an option upon graduation. High schools should not be in the business of predetermining any student's career path—they must open doors for each student by ensuring an equitable opportunity to achieve success in college and careers.



Small Learning Communities and Tracking: Evidence from Five High Schools Divided into Schools-within-Schools.

U.S. Department of Education (2006).

slcp.ed.gov

Target Users: site-visit teams and all stakeholders

When to Use This Resource

- To guide the early planning stages of SLCP work.
- To provide compelling research on the strategy of restructuring high schools into theme or career-based schools or academies, and how this approach can inadvertently lead to de facto tracking.

Focus of This Resource

From the SLCP website:

This paper describes how curriculum differentiation plays out in five public high schools that were divided into schools-within-schools. Drawing on data collected over several years in a sustained field-based study of these five schools, the paper explores how students' social and academic backgrounds are linked with their academic experiences.

From the SLCP website:

The comprehensive curriculum is a defining feature of U.S. public high schools. With the aim of "meeting students' needs," most schools offer a wide array of academic courses intended to accommodate students' interests, abilities, and levels of educational commitment. Such schools see offering courses that vary in content and rigor as a logical response to students' social and academic diversity. However, research has demonstrated that expansive curricula are associated with reduced learning and with learning that is more strongly related to students' race and social class (Gamoran 1987; Lee and Bryk 1989; Lee et al. 1998; Oakes 1985). This link between students' learning and their social backgrounds is strongest in schools with broad, diversified curricula (Gamoran and Mare 1989; Lee and Bryk 1989; Lee et al. 1997). Put simply, a more differentiated curriculum may lead to more varied academic experiences for students, but research suggests that such curricula foster and enforce social stratification among students, in schools, and in society as a whole.

Tips for Using This Resource

This resource provides compelling data for any SLCP leaders and stakeholders considering theme-based academies. This document allows site-visit teams to inquire about student-achievement data across the academies and also examine course-taking patterns within the academies. The following essential question will be helpful: Do the theme-based academies affect the rigor of the academic program or sort student by their perceived academic abilities or other characteristics, such as socioeconomic status, language abilities, or race?

8

Making the Move: How Freshman Academies and Thematic Small Learning Communities Can Support Successful Transitions to and through High School.

U.S. Department of Education (2006).

slcp.ed.gov

Target Users: site-visit teams, teachers, and school or district leaders

When to Use This Resource

- When considering specific SLC structures as a strategy for increasing student engagement, persistence, and success in high school, particularly during the transition into high school or between grade levels.

Focus of This Resource

From the Institute for Research and Reform (www.irre.org) website:

Making the Move examines how thematic small, personalized learning communities and freshman academies offer promising research-based approaches to significantly reducing school dropout rates between the 9th and 10th grades.

The authors represent two national model developers and technical assistance providers and a national research and policy organization involved in evaluating these and other high school reform programs. In this paper, they present the basic theory of change behind both small personalized learning communities and freshman academies, drawing deeply upon the youth development and education research bases. After situating thematic personalized learning communities and freshman academies within their respective comprehensive reform models, the authors put forward both formative and summative evidence to share lessons learned as technical assistance providers working with schools to implement these strategies.

Tips for Using This Resource

This paper provides data and research that will be helpful in making decisions about establishing specific, targeted programs to increase student success in ninth grade. The report is lengthy. One member of a leadership or visiting team could read the document and report on its key findings, rather than asking a large group to read and discuss the report.

Target Users: site-visit teams, key stakeholders, teachers in charge of ninth-grade students, and others participating in the planning of a supportive freshman transition strategy

When to Use This Resource

- To emphasize the importance of the ninth-grade transition and to communicate the need to make a supportive transition a two-year process (based on current research and school data on retention rates, etc.).
- To explore proven strategies that will address all three critical transition areas: academic support, the social and emotional development of the student, and organizational structures.
- To convene a team of key stakeholders, specifically those with responsibility for ninth-grade students.

Focus of This Resource

From the resource:

This tool includes descriptions of strategies and structures schools can put in place to support freshmen transition as well as a comprehensive freshmen transition-planning guide. The planning guide was used to assist freshmen academy teams in planning for a two-year transition process that involves all stakeholders (students, parents, faculty) and helps the team conduct ongoing assessments and evaluations of the process and impact of the transition plan and activities.

Tips for Using This Resource

The Freshman Transition Strategies Chart provides a detailed view of immediate and long-term strategies. Teams who need a jump-start on successful programs as well as a sense of how the strategies fit into a comprehensive vision for freshman success would benefit from reviewing these materials. The resource includes a detailed and well-designed comprehensive planning guide useful for taking notes during a site visit or for team planning.

Target Users: site-visit teams, leadership teams, teachers, and key stakeholders who are considering implementing ninth-grade transition strategies

When to Use This Resource

- To enhance knowledge of the research on successful student transition strategies from middle to high school.
- To illustrate the importance of academic success in ninth grade and analyzing key data on student performance, such as failure rates, course attendance, and behavioral incidences, among others.
- To help “make the case” for redesigning the ninth-grade experience.
- To assist the site-visit team in formulating questions for the host school.

Focus of This Resource

This policy brief describes the predictors for success and failure in high school and the importance of a systematic approach to the critical transition from middle school to ninth grade.

From the policy brief:

The 9th grade year is critical to students’ success in high school: The influence of a broader number of peers (both positive and negative); the potential of developing a bad habit such as skipping class; and entry into a larger, sometimes seemingly less caring, environment can all impact how students react.

Predictors of success in high school include:

Each additional percentage point increase in attendance decreases the odds of repeating 9th grade by 5%.

Higher-achieving students are considerably less likely to experience non-promotion in 9th grade.

The higher the number of credits a student attempts in 9th grade, the lower the odds of not being promoted to 10th grade.

Students attend class more often when they have strong relationships with their teachers, and when they see school and their coursework as relevant and important to their future.

Tips for Using This Resource

The data provided in this resource can be compared with SLC school data to make a compelling case for ensuring success in ninth grade. Many schools do not regularly collect this essential data, which should be an initial information-gathering step in the school-improvement process, the policy brief provides a strong argument for examining school data.



Changing Systems to Personalize Learning: The Power of Advisories.

The Education Alliance at Brown University (2003).

alliance.brown.edu/pubs/changing_systems/power_of_advisories

Target Users: site-visit teams, leadership teams, and teachers

When to Use This Resource

- As an initial reading to learn about the benefits of effective advisory programs and as a background resource when implementing advisories as part of the SLCP action plan.
- For site-visit teams to help in formulating a series of questions about the role of advisories in the school-improvement process.

Focus of This Resource

From the High School Alliance website:

The Power of Advisories workshop guidebook helps high school change teams conduct professional development workshops for school staff on setting up a school-wide advisory program, developing ways to introduce an adult advocate into the life of every student, and ensuring that each student has an advisor to help guide student planning, learning, and assessment. The Power of Advisories contains topical discussion materials, instructions, graphic organizers, exercises, protocols, and facilitator's guidelines.

Tips for Using This Resource

The guidebook is a comprehensive document that could be read by one or two members of a team, who could be tasked with selecting key excerpts from the text for the larger group. At least one member of a site-visit team should be well versed in the elements of implementing and running successful advisory programs. The visiting team should also inquire about how the host school overcame faculty fears and resistance, if any, to advisory programs. (Also see Toolkit resource #14.)

Section 2

Preparing for the Site Visit: Engaging in Group Planning and Goal-Setting Meetings

Target Users: site-visit teams, SLC leadership teams, and other groups working on SLC action plans

When to Use This Resource

- To emphasize the importance of a well-planned site visit.
- To establish the goals of the visit at the first team planning meeting.
- To facilitate the group planning process.
- To make adjustments after the team has done its background research, since new knowledge may shift goals.

Focus of This Resource

This protocol was designed to help groups set annual goals for their school. This easy-to-use group-facilitation protocol will help groups develop the overall goals of the site visit and build a shared sense of ownership over the process. It would also help members of the site-visit team coach parents and community members in what to look for—that is, in how to observe school programs and what questions to ask.

Tips for Using This Resource

This resource consists of five steps to help groups set goals and develop a plan for working collaboratively throughout the year. Each step of the process may be modified to align with the specific goals of the site visit. The first step involves making sure everyone understands the process. The second step asks participants to identify the work they would like to bring to the group—what they would like to read and what they think the school should address. For the purpose of the site visit, the second step can be modified by asking participants to list the following:

- Programs and practices of personal interest.
- Questions they have about these programs and practices.
- What they think will be important to learn from the visit.

The remaining steps follow a protocol to help the group narrow its focus and assign responsibilities for learning about specific programs, both through readings and during the site visit.

Target Users: site-visit teams, teachers, and key stakeholders

When to Use This Resource

- To provide practice for site-visit teams engaged in analyzing student data in the effort to build a more compelling case for implementing SLC strategies.
- To help teams review data shared by the host school.
- To assist parents and community members whose only knowledge of secondary schools is their personal experience.

Focus of This Resource

The three elements of this resource—predictions, observations, and inferences—allow participants to look at data in a structured way and use it to inform planning and decisions. In this process, participants learn to make predictions, observe data, and make inferences from the data under review. The process helps teams focus on factual information about the school or particular groups of students, rather than on personal beliefs or assumptions. The process uses a structured dialogue format that provides effective techniques for managing the discussion.

Tips for Using this Resource

The team leader should select data that would be useful for the team to discuss before a site visit. This could include ninth-grade success or course-failure data; student attendance and disciplinary data; student achievement data or patterns at specific points during the high school career; or college-enrollment and -persistence data, among others. The data review could also help in the formulation of goals for the visit. For example, if the visiting school has a high freshman-failure rate, the team may want to target transition programs during their visit.

Target Users: site-visit teams and teachers

When to Use This Resource

- To review school course offerings and program descriptions during planning meeting or during the visit.
- To engage in conversations about what effective organizational or instructional practices that prepare all students for higher education look like in practice.
- To formulate questions about grouping practices, equitable access to challenging learning opportunities, and setting high expectations for all students.

Focus of This Resource

The College Readiness for All Toolbox provides tools for educators to assess the degree to which all students are guaranteed a rigorous, student-centered curriculum that prepares them for college and careers. The core topics include leading change and enhancing expectations of what students can do, as well as improving their achievement and increasing their access to postsecondary options.

The tools within each topic include checklists and small-group activities that will help school faculty, administrators, and site-visit teams assess the school's current status in a particular category and determine options for improvement. Embedded in the tools are the common challenging questions of high school reform initiatives involved in preparing all students for college and careers.

Tips for Using This Resource

Use these tools for a quick assessment of current practice in the school. The templates and checklists then serve as a basis for conversation. For example, the checklist on evaluation of high expectations asks the user to indicate whether or not the school has established a common college-ready goal for all students, and whether programs and instructional practices are in fact aligned with that goal.

Target Users: site-visit teams, school leaders, and teachers

When to Use This Resource

- To familiarize the site-visit team with the various strategies that enable students to earn college credits while in high school, and in particular how schools can provide lower-performing students with opportunities to participate in college-preparation and -access programs.
- To foster dialogue about equity issues, such as who is permitted to access rigorous college-preparatory programs.

Focus of This Resource

This report describes five programmatic strategies that enable students to earn college credit for coursework completed in high school. The five strategies described in the report are dual enrollment (courses that allow students to earn both high school and college credit simultaneously), Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, Tech Prep, and Middle College High Schools. There is growing interest in using these programs, referred to as credit-based transition programs, with students who are not typically selected for or enrolled in advanced programs. The report reviews the overall success of early college strategies in increasing college access and success.

Tips for Using This Resource

The barriers to higher education are diverse and complex. First-generation students often have no college-going history in their family, and there may be a lack of family confidence in the college-application process. During the site visit, schools can look for programs that specifically address this factor. For example, early college programs that provide an on-campus collegiate experience, that partner a high school student with an adult mentor, or that offer special programs and services to welcome high school students to the campus are likely to help remove some of the usual barriers to postsecondary education.

Target Users: site-visit teams, teachers, and other practitioners

When to Use This Resource

- To help frame a conversation about ways to increase participation in Advanced Placement courses.
- To help frame the conversation and reaffirm that Advanced Placement is for anyone who wants to participate and is willing to do the work.

Focus of This Resource

From the guide:

This guide is a sampler of activities that prepare students to succeed in AP and other rigorous courses. Educators have come up with many practical and effective ways to open classroom doors and maintain high academic standards in the Advanced Placement Program (AP). The schools and districts represent a cross section of America, serving populations as diverse as the nation itself. The many approaches to increasing AP participation by traditionally underrepresented and at-risk students include:

- *administrative efforts such as creative scheduling and staffing,*
- *instructional efforts such as teacher professional development and curriculum alignment to germinate academic excellence in the middle schools, and*
- *counseling outreach to recruit and encourage young scholars while informing them and their families of what is expected in advanced courses.*

The institutions featured in this booklet have various policies and practices, and may be in early stages of implementing broader equity programs. Some approaches are homespun or privately contracted, while others are sponsored by the College Board. But they all have in common a philosophy and commitment to ensuring that students of every racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic group background are represented in AP.

Tips for Using This Resource

The guide is a good match for the SLCP goal of graduating all students ready for college and work. Students need high expectations, access to rigor programs, and the personalized support they need to succeed. The resource is also useful for framing conversations about the beliefs and practices that must in place if schools want to achieve this goal. Site-visit teams may look for some elements described in the guide at the host school or use it for discussion purposes with faculty at their own school.

Questions for the host school could include the following: Do all teachers have an opportunity to teach Advanced Placement courses in the school? Do all students have access to these courses? How does the school ensure a high level of rigor and equitable enrollment patterns across Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, honors, and other advanced courses and programs?

Target Users: site-visit teams, teams of teachers, leadership teams, and community groups

When to Use This Resource

- To engage in conversations that focus on teaching and learning, the quality of student work, and implications for school-improvement work (structures and strategies).
- To train group facilitators (team leaders, site-visit team leaders, and teacher-leaders) who will lead conversations that attempt to get at the root causes of poor academic achievement from the stance of classroom practice.
- To help teams frame conversations and questions about practice in a thoughtful, non-threatening way.

Focus of This Resource

From the document:

A Critical Friends Group is a professional learning community consisting of approximately 8–12 educators who come together voluntarily at least once a month to talk about teaching and learning. Group members are committed to improving their practice through collaborative learning. In 1994, the Annenberg Institute for School Reform designed a different approach to professional development, one that would be focused on the practitioner and on defining what will improve student learning.

Critical Friends Groups are designed to:

- Create a professional learning community.
- Make teaching practice explicit and public by “talking about teaching”.
- Help people involved in schools to work collaboratively in democratic, reflective communities.
- Establish a foundation for sustained professional development based on a spirit of inquiry.
- Provide a context to understand our work with students, our relationships with peers, and our thoughts, assumptions, and beliefs about teaching and learning.
- Help educators help each other turn theories into practice and standards into actual student learning.
- Improve teaching and learning.

Tips for Using This Resource

Building an effective professional learning community model requires a continuous effort over time by the school leadership. The strategies used in critical friends groups provide a vehicle to talk about teaching and learning in a nonthreatening environment. Group leaders need to be trained in dialogue facilitation and using appropriate protocols. The time invested pays off in an increased ability on the part of teachers and leaders to look at classroom practice and student work more thoughtfully—a practice that can have a direct and significant impact on instructional quality.

Section 3

Renewing and Assessing Implementation Strategies: Resources to Use During the Site Visit

Target Users: site-visit teams, school leaders, and teachers involved in the SLC work or other school-improvement programs

When to Use This Resource

- To develop a set of questions or a personal checklist of materials to use during a site visit.

Focus of This Resource

This resource entails a website developed by the Academy for Educational Development and Johns Hopkins University, providing information about twenty-five high school reform strategies, organized by the following categories: organization of school and school day; curriculum and instruction; assessment; student academic and social supports; staff support and incentives; and family, community, and industry partnerships.

Each section contains extended definitions, essential features of the strategy, research, best practices, a checklist for implementation, and resources. While the website is intended to support and strengthen reform efforts, it is also useful as a quick way to increase knowledge about a particular strategy.

Tips for Using this Resource

The High School Reform Strategy Toolkit is a great place to start a search about a specific strategy. The checklists help a visiting team develop questions about implementing one or more of the twenty-five strategies in the toolkit, as well as identify the strategies used by the host school. It is important to keep in mind that systemic, sustainable reform involves every aspect of the school community and goes deeper than any particular strategy being implemented. It is important to ask the host school to describe in detail the process by which they selected strategies for their school and how all the strategies work together to achieve the school's goals.

Target Users: site-visit teams

When to Use This Resource

- To assess the degree to which a particular strategy or condition exists in a school.
- To help a visiting team formulate questions and understand the degree to which a strategy may be sustainable within the school system.

Focus of This Resource

This resource contains templates to assess both school-wide and structural program indicators (SLCs, academies, teams, thematic programs, etc.) in the following categories: engaged community and youth; empowered educators; academic engagement for students; personalized learning environment; an integrated system of high standards, assessments and supports; and accountable leaders.

Tips for Using This Resource

Using the templates, refer to the sustainability column to formulate questions for use during the site visit. The host school should be able to provide examples of strategies or structures outlined in the sustainability column. For example, in the category of “academic engagement for students,” one school-wide indicator is: The school has eliminated all nonacademically rigorous courses and tracks. The visiting team might look at a series of recent course catalogs or programs of study to understand what courses have been eliminated, what grouping practices are currently being used, what level of access students have to the most rigorous academic programs, and what kind of expectations are set for all students.



Interdisciplinary Team Meeting Agenda.
Noble High School (undated).
(see *supplemental resources document*)



Target Users: site-visit teams, teachers, and other practitioners on an interdisciplinary team

When to Use This Resource

- To foster discussions about effective ways to use common planning time within an interdisciplinary setting.
- As a reference when observing team meetings in a school.

Focus of This Resource

The sample agenda shows how interdisciplinary teaching teams engage in an effective meeting focused on teaching, learning, and curriculum planning.

Tips for Using This Resource

One effective way to design team meetings is to build in professional development activities related to classroom management, use of time within blocks, and differentiated instructional practices that can reach all learners. The team members in this document emphasize the importance of ensuring that meetings do not primarily become venues for discussing individual student problems, which can be addressed at the end of the meeting or in a different setting.

Target User: site-visit teams

When to Use This Resource

- When touring a school when classes are not in session or during the school day when particular classrooms are empty.

Focus of This Resource

The purpose of this protocol is to help site-visit teams learn by visiting a classroom when the students are not present. Participants sit in a classroom for no more than fifteen minutes and document evidence of ongoing learning, a learner-centered classroom, a professional community, student work, diversity, and equity.

Participants may add to or change the categories based upon interests (such as differentiated instruction and assessments, use of technology, project-based work, etc). The debrief involves a discussion of “evidence” versus “evaluation.”

Tips for Using this Resource

During a site visit, use a modified version of the protocol by first developing an evidence list that is pertinent to the team’s needs and interests, and then carrying out the visit in pairs or individually. The debriefing session later in the day would give the visiting team time to share. The protocol is useful in situations where there may not be enough classes in session or if there is any “down-time” during the day. Permission to be in empty classrooms should first be granted by the teacher.

Target Users: site-visit teams, leadership teams, administrators, and practitioners

When to Use This Resource

- As a reference during a school visit where there is a senior-project program in place.
- During leadership-team discussions when implementation of a senior project is being considered.

Focus of This Resource

This resource is a guide for students engaged in developing and presenting a senior project. It provides detailed guidance on every aspect of project requirements, including the presentation and research paper.

Tips for Using This Resource

Implementing a successful senior-project program begins in the ninth grade and continues over the course of a student's high school career. Over time, students learn to present their work and increase their understanding of high-quality writing, research, speaking, and other essential skills. Site-visit teams will want to converse with teachers about how senior projects are scheduled in a school, the time demands they will require from teachers, and how student work is shared with the community. Teams should also investigate and discuss the impact of senior projects on the overall senior-year experience: Do students end the year with a rewarding culminating academic experience or do they stop working after mid-year? (For example, do students present their projects near the end of the academic year?) What efforts are made to keep students engaged in their senior project and in the school as a whole?

Target Users: site-visit teams, leadership teams, and practitioners

When to Use This Resource

- When using data to analyze the cause of a problem within a school or program.
- To help team members formulate questions during a site visit that are based on a review of student data and other information shared by the host school, or to formulate questions that could be resolved by analyzing data.

Focus of This Resource

The purpose of this resource is to help teams identify problem areas from an analysis of their school data and thus conduct an inquiry into their SLC program or other initiatives. The tools help teams think systemically about the range of questions that could be used to guide inquiry.

Tips for Using This Resource

When site-visit teams are huddling to compare notes or debrief, the grid provided in this resource can help a team organize questions and think about what data might be available to answer their questions. For example, samples of current student work could be compared with earlier work to address a question about whether the rigor and quality of student work has improved.

Target User: site-visit teams, administrators, practitioners, and school committees

When to Use This Resource

- To help schools garner parent opinions about local school initiatives and to help site-visit teams formulate questions for a parent focus group.

Focus of This Resource

The survey was designed by an SLC evaluator to gather data on parent attitudes, opinions, and feelings.

Tips for Using This Resource

The survey can be used as a springboard for parent discussion groups. The items on the survey are important to consider when involved in any school-improvement initiative. Remember, you can only have as good a school as the community will allow, and therefore it's important to stay on top of parent opinion.

It is a good idea to involve parents in the evaluation of new initiatives and to give them a strategic role beyond a survey. Involving active parents as well as those with strong opinions about the school program in an evaluation team helps school leaders understand what they need to do to gain parent support. For example, some schools have welcomed parents into classrooms to observe how heterogeneous grouping works in practice. Afterward, parents are asked to indicate, using specific examples, whether they think student needs were being met. Parents need active, authentic roles in school-improvement initiatives and in the evaluation of these efforts. This is difficult work, but it helps minimize the potential impact of organized resistance to change.

Target Users: site-visit teams, leadership teams, and administrators

When to Use This Resource

- As a guide to help schools develop student surveys.
- As a reference during a site visit.

Focus of This Resource

The purpose of this resource is to survey students on their attitudes, opinions, and feelings about the SLCP initiative and the changes taking place in their school. The survey was developed by an SLCP grant evaluator.

Tips for Using This Resource

This resource is helpful for educators developing a student survey for their school. For site-visit teams, the members will find the survey items helpful if they are going to be talking with a group of students during the site visit. In some cases, students may be unaware of changes taking place in a school, or how they are connected to the SLCP grant, unless they directly impact their classroom lives. This lack of awareness might result in negative attitudes emerging in survey responses. It's important to consider how students are involved in the SLC work and in the leadership of the school, and the degree to which they have a voice in school decisions and choice in about their particular academic program. For example, are students required to choose a particular career academy? Did students participate in developing the major themes for the academies? Have new courses been integrated into the curriculum as a result of student requests or needs?

Target Users: site-visit teams, leadership teams, administrators, and practitioners

When to Use This Resource

- To identify the gaps, usually at the conclusion of a site visit, between the current status of reform at the home school and the “preferred future” as seen through the eyes of the visiting team.

Focus of This Resource

The site-visit team can use this resource to compare where their school is with where they would like it to be. The gap-analysis activity is a precursor to the strategy analysis, in which teams identify strategies that best fit the school’s needs and that will help them move forward.

Tips for Using This Resource

At the conclusion of a site visit, teams have greater insight into their own work as well as that of the host school. Because teams will be thinking of the work they will have to do when they return to their school, and it might make them feel a little overwhelmed. The identification of gaps and strategies for addressing them can help team members think about their preferred future and determine what it would take to get there. This activity should be facilitated to keep teams from devolving into “blame games” that seek to displace responsibility for why their school is where it is. In addition, the chart provided in this resource is a good place to start when planning the presentation that will be given on the third day by the visiting team.

Target Users: leadership teams

When to Use This Resource

- To help school teams, during the grant-application planning process, develop goals and objectives based upon needs identified from reviewing current student data.
- To support the continuous review of data so that strategies may be adjusted over time to achieve the goal.
- To promote better understanding of a school's alignment of goals, objectives, and strategies.

Focus of This Resource

This new guide provides a step-by-step process for writing clear goals and measurable objectives. Rich examples are embedded in the process, which illustrates the role of goals and objectives in the whole-school improvement strategy. The guide makes the case for developing clear goals and objectives from the beginning so that all stakeholders will understand the actions the school intends to take toward improvement.

Tips for Using This Resource

Schools often need help achieving clarity about goals and objectives, the strategies they will employ to achieve their goals, and how they can measure progress. Site-visit teams could use this resource to review its written plan before a site visit. During the visit, the resource could assist school inquiry into the details of the host school's action plan and evaluation process.

Target Users: site-visit teams, all stakeholders, and leadership teams in particular

When to Use This Resource

- As a guide for site-visit teams when they are working to understand how the goals and objectives of the host school align with the actual strategies they are implementing.
- As a reference to ensure that SLCP goals are targeted and measurable.

Focus of This Resource

This resource helps teams write goals and objectives that focus on student achievement. The tutorial assists teams that are drafting new goals for a grant or refining goals along the way, while helping members think about how they will measure progress toward each goal. The tutorial is drawn from SLCP goals and objectives and considers the question: “Why are they so important?”

Tips for Using This Resource

This resource will help teams understand how SLCP goals must be actualized in the host school and their own school. Do the strategies in the host school seem to be a “smorgasbord” of disconnected ideas or are they focused, targeted system designed to achieve specific goals? How do the host school’s goals and objectives compare with your school’s work? What can you learn about your work from examining the goals and objectives of the host school?

Target Users: site-visit teams, leadership teams, administrators, and practitioners

When to Use This Resource

- To augment and broaden the gap-analysis exercise.

Focus of This Resource

The purpose of this resource is to help teams identify strategies that best fit the needs of their school. The grid helps teams develop a rationale for a particular school-improvement strategy. It also requires the team to identify professional development needs and the likely impact of the strategy on the rest of the school.

Tips for Using This Resource

During a site visit or at home, this resource is a helpful activity for clarifying and justifying specific strategies that the school would implement to accomplish its goals. It is also useful when preparing a presentation.

Target Users: site-visit teams, leadership teams, and practitioners

When to Use This Resource

- In seeking assistance from colleagues in fine-tuning and improving school-improvement work.
- When presenting the SLC plan to the host school or to stakeholders back home, and when requesting feedback from the school community.

Focus of This Resource

From the protocol:

Excerpted, with slight adaptations, from Looking Together at Student Work by Tina Blythe, David Allen, and Barbara S. Powell (New York: Teachers College Press, 1999), the tuning protocol was originally developed as a means for the five high schools in the Coalition of Essential School's Exhibitions Project to receive feedback and fine-tune their student assessment systems. These assessment systems included exhibitions, portfolios, and design projects. Recognizing the complexities involved in developing new forms of assessment, the project staff created a facilitated process to support educators in sharing their students' work with colleagues and reflecting upon the lessons learned from this work about students' strengths and weaknesses.

This collaborative reflection helps educators design and refine their assessment systems and support higher quality student performance. Since its trial run in 1992, the tuning protocol has been widely used and adapted for professional development purposes in and among schools across the country.

Tips for Using This Resource

As stated above, site-visit teams may use this resource as a protocol for sharing their work on the final day of the site visit. The process provides a structure for receiving high-quality feedback from colleagues in a thoughtful and nonjudgmental way. Once teams have completed a gap analysis and refined goals, the tuning protocol provides an excellent vehicle for presenting their work to the school and community.

Target Users: site-visit teams and any groups or individuals looking for guidance on resolving a complex issue or dilemma

When to Use This Resource

- To help a team frame a complex issue about its work.
- To facilitate assistance from the host school during a site-visit team's final presentation on day three.

Focus of This Resource

From the protocol:

The Consultancy Protocol was developed by Gene Thompson-Grove as part of the Coalition of Essential Schools' National Re:Learning Faculty Program, and further adapted and revised as part of work of NSRF.

A "consultancy" is a structured process for helping an individual or a team think more expansively about a particular, concrete dilemma. Outside perspective is critical to this protocol working effectively; therefore, some of the participants in the group must be people who do not share the presenter's specific dilemma at that time. When putting together a Consultancy group, be sure to include people with differing perspectives.

Tips for Using This Resource

Consultancies work well when those presenting the dilemma or issue are able to clearly frame their dilemma. Participants need to understand the difference between clarifying and probing questions and feel comfortable discussing the dilemma with the presenters in the room. As part of a site visit, it gives the visiting team a protocol for receiving assistance from the host school, using a structured format with specific comments that can be used back home. This strategy avoids the team falling back on anecdotal remarks from casual hallway talk. While not typical, some host schools have used this protocol to gain assistance from visiting teams.

Appendix

Additional Tools, Resources and Websites

Achieve

achieve.org

As a part of Measures that Matter, a joint effort by Achieve and The Education Trust to provide college- and career-ready assistance to states, the report Making College and Career Readiness the Mission for High School: A Guide for State Policymakers is particularly useful.

America's Promise Alliance

americaspromise.org

This site offers a variety research on dropout prevention and closing the graduation gap, including a compelling report documenting America's failure to educate its poor.

Betterhighschools.org

betterhighschools.org

This site provides a collection of resources for high school improvement, including strategies for community engagement, dropout prevention, and strengthening the transition into and out of high school. Among the many resources, the High School Dropout Quick Stats Fact Sheet (2007) provides information on the students most likely to dropout.

College Readiness for All Toolbox

toolbox.pathwaystocollege.net

This set of resources includes a nine-step implementation model for change, and many tools for enhancing expectations, achievement, and access that will help users identify, evaluate, and develop programs to support all learners achieving at a rigorous, college-ready level.

Common Core State Standards Initiative

corestandards.org

The Common Core State Standards Initiative envisions every state adopting a common set of college- and career-ready standards for all high school students.

Doing What Works: Research-Based Education Practices Online

dww.ed.gov

Doing What Works (DWW) is a website sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education. The goal of DWW is to create an online library of resources that may help teachers, schools, districts, states and technical assistance providers implement research-based instructional practice.

Edutopia

edutopia.org

Edutopia's many resources include extensive information on project-based learning.

Principals' Partnership

principalspartnership.com

Common Planning Time for High School Teachers (2007) is a short report on the advantages and disadvantages of common planning time

Washington State Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction

k12.wa.us

This site includes videos useful in a school professional development environment.